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The Rhetorical Use of Non-Standard Dialect in the First-Year Composition Classroom

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Lesson Plan: Using Non-Standard Dialect Rhetorically
Developed by Megan Busch, University of South Carolina

Lesson Timing: If the reading of Hurston's "Court Order Can't Make Races Mix" is assigned before class, this assignment should take approximately 50-60 minutes. If reading is provided in-class, allow 75-90 minutes.

Context: This lesson is best suited for students in a composition classroom, first-year of college or beyond (or perhaps honors 12th grade English). Ideally, students would have already explored the basic principles of rhetorical theory and would be beginning to understand writing as a reader-focused activity. Furthermore, students should have experience reading rhetorical situations and grappling with works of varying styles.

Opening the Discussion (Approx. 5 Minutes): Every student enters the first-year writing classroom with a dialect all their own; no one naturally speaks standard or academic English. To help students understand this and to begin discussion in the classroom, I take a quick poll. I draw a soda can on the board and ask students how they would reference this object. Of course, students use a wide range of terms: *soda*, *pop*, *coke*, etc. Then, I explain dialect and the inherent social problems of a "standard," particularly when the standard favors the speech of the more powerful or prestigious class. Here, I also introduce the concept of code-meshing (developed by Suresh Canagarajah and Vershawn Ashanti Young) and its rhetorical value.

See suggested readings section for selected readings about nonstandard dialect and code-meshing

Freewriting Activity (Approx. 5 Minutes): During a freewriting or journaling time, students make a list of the words specific to their hometown, region, or culture. For any words they believe are particularly unique, students provide a definition. For example, if you're from the South, *y'all* might be a regularly used word in your vocabulary. I ask students to share some of what they've written; most are generally eager to do so.

Zora Neale Hurston Analysis—Discussion or Group Work (Approx. 15 Minutes): Discussion then moves to "Court Order Can't Make Races Mix," which can be completed as a class or in smaller discussion groups. A sample list of questions is provided here:

1. What is Hurston's argument? Can you pinpoint a thesis statement?
2. What is her evidence in support of her argument?
3. What is unique about her voice?
4. In what specific scenarios do you find Hurston's home dialect?
5. What was her purpose in engaging her dialect?
6. How do you think it affected her audience?
7. Do you think Hurston using nonstandard dialect is effective in her argument? Why or why not?

In-Class Writing Assignment (Approx. 30 Minutes): Each student then composes a "Letter to the Editor" of his or her hometown's newspaper discussing a topic of importance in his or her city/town. For example, in Charleston, many do not want to extend interstate 526 to reach rural Johns Island because of the urban sprawl that will occur with the presence of a major highway. Instructions for students are provided below.

Instructions:

1. Compose a "Letter to the Editor" of your hometown newspaper. Consider a hot-topic issue in your hometown, and argue your stance about the issue. Maybe parents are unhappy with the large class sizes in the elementary school or perhaps students from your high school are upset that a local hangout is closing. Whatever the issue may be, write a letter to your hometown newspaper arguing one side of the issue. No research is necessary for this assignment, so no works cited is required. Letters to the Editor should be two solid paragraphs (each *at least* 5-7 sentences).
2. Once you have a draft, review your language. Are there phrases or words from your hometown that you could use to enhance your argument (as Zora Neale Hurston did)? If so, add them in.
3. Finally, reflect on your writing. Answer the following questions (using full sentences) about the assignment you just completed.

- a. Do you think that using the language of your hometown audience has an effect on the audience?
- b. Why did you choose the specific hometown words that you used?
- c. Are you confident that your letter (inclusive of these words or phrases) would be accepted by the newspaper for publication if submitted? Why or why not?
- d. Would you be comfortable submitting this argument in an English class with another professor (who did not ask you to do this assignment)? Why or why not?

Adaptation for Online Coursework: This assignment can easily be transformed into an online assignment (as part of a face-to-face class or as part of a fully online course). Transpose the writing assignment to the discussion section of online learning software (like Blackboard). If students post their Letters to the Editor in the discussion section, instructors should also ask students to read another's work and answer a prompt, such as: Did the author's voice sound authentic? Does he or she have a believable ethos? Does language affect the author's ethos?

Adaptation for ESL Students: ESL students really enjoy this time to be translingual—to introduce the class to their own language and play with the mixture between English and foreign languages. If you are teaching ESL students, explain to them the importance of choosing the best word for a given scenario. For example, if a student is from Paris, he or she may find that *trouville* is the best word to describe a “chance encounter” instead of the English counterpart. Instructors should ask ESL students first to compose in English (a single paragraph may be more appropriate for the time limit for ESL students). Then, re-read the paragraph and see where words from his or her home language may be more appropriate than English. ESL students should provide a brief glossary of terms used.

Student Examples:

(Student from the Southern United States)

Letter to the Editor: Listening to a large controversial issue is usually the first thing considered in making a large decision. Although, the Lexington-Richland 5 school board proved otherwise when they signed the deal on a \$932,950 purchase of 24 acres on Amicks Ferry Road. While this transaction not only got on my last nerve, it seemed to stir the pot even more for the nearby residents. The community constantly preached that the board should hold their horses, yet the board stuck to their so thought of fine and dandy plan. So here I am living in the center of it all, finding numerous issues with this swift decision.

Making the 8 mile drive down yonder on Amicks Ferry Road is my everyday commute while living in the town of Chapin. Yet, this doesn't discredit the countless issues that I face during every drive. Whether the day comes with poor road conditions or traffic backup, the winding road is not fit for a students commute. The need for a new school does not go unnoticed, yet when it comes with an overpriced lot, countless rejection pleas, and safety concerns, the need for re-evaluation is evident. Therefore, the folks of this community will keep asking “what in tarnation”, because the question still stands and the answer doesn't suit their fancy. Meanwhile, the super attendant still acts too big for his britches. So the hissy fit remains and I surely declare that you say yer prayers for a blessing from above because a storm is brewing in this small southern town.

Reflection: I definitely think that using a southern dialect will help appropriately relate to my audience and express my tone. I think that southern phrases have a talent of providing both humor and severity in compositions. Therefore, an article like this would track a large popularity throughout the community. I truly only used the southern language that I grew up with because it felt most real. These are phrases and words that I heard throughout my household or community during my childhood. They seemed to reflect the tone of my community throughout this issue and express the annoyance that they feel.

(Student from Philadelphia)

Letter to the Editor: We're all worried about which Nick Foles we're going to see on Sunday. I mean the man has a sus history of either being one of better QBs in the game, or just not even showing up. Even still, barring that St.Nick shows up at 110%, seeing Brady's injured hand effect his performance would be the jimmies on top of the Eagles perfect sundae. Not that I hate Tom or anything, but we can't have a repeat '05 super bowl. I'd lose it bro. Anyways, that's just my two cents. Hope to be partying with yous on Broad Street this Sunday after an Eagles win. Go Birds!

Reflection: I think that for articles regarding local food reviews, local sports teams, or things of that nature, using local language could make the readers more likely to relate to you and read your article with a more open mind. The words I picked were words that my family and friends commonly use [in Philadelphia], and a good amount of them have to do with food and sports which are pretty important in the area. I totally think the Philadelphia Inquirer would accept the commentary, as they typically have a witty tone and their topics are centered around local events. I would not want to submit this with another professor just because I have been told that using "slang" can come off uneducated and for academic assignments, it can come off disrespectful.

(Student from Sweden)

Letter to the Editor: As you present very well in your article, the knife robberies towards under aged people has increased a lot just over the last couple of years, with an all time high amount of robberies during 2017. I think it is fair to say that Nacka, that is municipality outside Stockholm, have had very few problems through out the last couple of years compared to a lot of the other municipality around Stockholm. But just because Nacka barely has had any problem of this kind earlier, does not mean that we should not do anything. For me it is unbelievable how the "Snuten" haven't caught anyone.

During 2017 there were a total of 38 robberies against under aged people. Four years ago, the same number was 8. In most of these robberies there has been "tjuringar" involved which makes them much more serious. Most of the robbers have been "maskerade" which makes the investigation harder. During the last five years Sweden have accepted a lot of "invandrare" from the Mid-East and I think it is important to keep the facts straight. A lot of people have been quick to put the blame on "invandrarna" for all the bad things that happens in the Swedish society. Obviously, that is not true, and in most of theses robberies there has been Swedish guys and not "invandrarne" . Putting all the blame on "invandrarna" will only lead to a segregated society and will not end the problem, but just cause more.

But this is up to the politicians. Nacka can not have ten year old children in Nacka not being able to walk home from school without getting robbed by "tjuringar". The politicians can not just sit around hoping for the crimes to solve themselves, because we all know that it is not going to happen. We need more "snutar" in the area. There has to become some kind of increase in "snutar" in Nacka and at the same time, more money and resources needs to be spent to find the robbers and let them pay for what they have done. If not, this problem is going to continue, and who knows what could happen...

Reflection: I definitely believe that the audience is affected by the way people write, especially when you include words that are related to a specific area. The Swedish language differs a lot depending from where in Sweden you are. Therefore, the language in north compared to the south sounds quite different, which I believe affects the reader. By including your local words, you immediately tell the audience where you're from, which could be both positive and negative. I think people connect words from a specific place with stereotypes of the people living there which change the view of the article. I would probably read an article written by a person from the south another way than I would with a person from the north because I have expectations and stereotypes of how they think, are, what their political standpoints are and so on. I believe that if people would read my article with words connected to Stockholm, people would read it with different eyes. In my specific case, being from the capitol of Sweden, I believe that people not from Stockholm view "us" as people that sees themselves better than people not living in Stockholm. That is probably true in some cases, but definitely not in all.

Recommended Reading for Instructors:

Canagarajah, Suresh. "Codemeshing in Academic Writing: Identifying Teachable Strategies of Translanguaging." *The Modern Language Journal*, Vol. 95, No. 3, Fall 2011, pp. 401-417.

Wolfram, Walt and Natalie Schilling-Estes. *American English: Dialects and Variation*. Blackwell Publishers, 1998.

Young, Vershawn Ashanti, Y'Shanda Young-Rivera, and Kim Brian Lovejoy. *Other People's English: Code-Meshing, Code-Switching, and African American Literacy*. Teachers College Press, 2014.